



Henri Baron Leys, *Charity*, 1850, oil on panel, 62.5 x 45.1 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Many European countries in the nineteenth century became increasingly interested in their national past, and Belgium was no exception. A great admirer of medieval and Renaissance art, Henri Leys (1815–1869) portrayed historical subjects as well as moralistic genre scenes, which

he often placed in historical settings. The scene in *Charity* is situated in Flanders in the sixteenth century, when Belgium was one of the cultural and economic hubs of Europe. The artist had another reason to indulge in historicism: following the Belgian Revolution (1830–31), the southern provinces of the Netherlands established an independent Kingdom of Belgium, recalling the moment in the sixteenth century when seven northern provinces of the Netherlands proclaimed their independence from the Spanish domination and established the Republic of the Seven United Provinces. In this painting, the woman is giving alms to a boy as a merciful benefactress, while the two women from his family display obedience and humility. The older woman modestly casts her eyes down, lightly bending and encouraging the child to take alms, while the younger woman raises her eyes to God, her hands clasped in a thankful prayer. The work is intended to remind the viewer that if one behaves generously and mercifully towards others, regardless of their social status, one will win the same grace from God. Leys conveys the patriotism of the era by imbuing his work with lofty notions of an ideal civic society.

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